

# MENDING FENCES

Ranch appreciation work days allow sportsmen to give something back to landowners who open up their property each fall.

BY ALAN CHARLES

Early on a sunny Saturday this past April, a group of 16 hunters and anglers gathered a few miles east of Colstrip at the Rocker Six Cattle Company Ranch, owned by the Wally and Clint McRae families. They came from Helena, Miles City, Ashland, Colstrip, and places in between. Some carried generators, chain saws, and power tools, while others toted hammers, fencing pliers, and work gloves. All of them brought energy and enthusiasm. ▶▶



The sportsmen came to donate time and effort in appreciation for the many years the McRae Ranch has provided wildlife habitat and public hunting opportunities.

The McRae Ranch Appreciation Work Day was organized by Bill Dawson, an Ashland-area sportsman and Fish, Wildlife & Parks game warden. Dawson worked with the Colstrip Rod and Gun Club and the McRae family to determine which projects would help the ranch most, and what materials and people were needed. The Montana Game Wardens Association helped sponsor the event.

There's nothing particularly newsworthy about hunters helping out ranchers. Montana's hunting heritage and traditions have been built by landowners and sportsmen caring for the land and wildlife. Many similar efforts have taken place in years past, and many individual hunters regularly donate time to help landowners who have allowed them to hunt.

Despite the ordinary nature of these activities, however, it's important the stories get told. Landowners and hunters share much more common ground than indicated by the negative stories in the media lately about con-

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flicts over access (for example, see “Permission Denied,” page 28). The future of Montana's healthy landscapes and wealth of wildlife depends largely on these two groups working together on issues of mutual concern.

#### SOUND OF POUNDING

At 8 a.m., ranchers Clint and Wally McRae welcomed the team of volunteers. Work

crews were quickly organized and given a brief orientation on safety and project procedures. Soon the sound of power generators and pounding hammers filled the air at a site where volunteers were building a windbreak. Elsewhere on the ranch, fencers began pounding posts and splicing wires.

At noon, when the volunteers traded their tools for the sack lunches they'd brought, ranchers and hunters sat side by side, sharing stories about their families, the ranch's history, and past hunting trips. Then it was back to work. By late afternoon, the crews had built a covered windbreak for sheltering livestock and put up or repaired several miles of fence. “That windbreak would have taken us two weeks to build, and this is the first time in ten years we've had all of our fences in good shape,” said Clint McRae as he surveyed the work. “It was a special day to have these folks volunteer their time to help us out.” Some of the volunteers had to leave early, but the rest stayed for a dinner of ranch beef barbecued at the ranch headquarters.

When the sun set, there was little doubt that the day had been a success. The volunteers had completed their projects, but more importantly they had donated time and effort to say thanks to a ranch family. The day had a festive feeling because

the effort represented a way to celebrate Montana's hunting heritage and strong landowner-hunter relations. Ideally, the relationship between landowners and hunters is reciprocal. Landowners provide wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities through good stewardship and a sense of community, while hunters show their appreciation by hunting responsibly and donating time and effort to help with ranch projects. The ranch appreciation work day reinforced that cooperative partnership.

#### HOW CAN WE HELP?

A month later, at an eastern Montana ranch, a different group of hunters gathered to donate a day of work to help a local ranch family. This effort at the Cecil Brown Ranch was organized by the Montana Bowhunters Association (MBA), working with regional FWP staff. Months earlier, during the annual MBA convention, the group's members had learned that Mark Forman, the Brown Ranch owner and operator, had died in a ranch accident. They asked what they could do to help the family and show their appreciation for the years of public hunting access and wildlife habitat the ranch has provided. Ranch family members said a spring snowstorm had damaged fence lines; because they were short-

handed, they might not be able to fix all the fences in time to pasture cattle.

After several weeks of e-mails and phone calls, the volunteers set a date and laid out a plan. As at the McRae Ranch, they came from all directions, including Bozeman, Helena, Billings, Broadus, and Miles City. Some arrived with all-terrain vehicles, while others brought fence stretchers, post-pounders, pliers, and staples. Some were experienced fencers, but most had no fencing experience and were simply eager to learn and help.

The ranch family members welcomed and thanked the group of volunteers. After explaining the work detail and providing safety instruction, they sent crews to different parts of the ranch, located in the Knowlton Hills east of Miles City.

There is no better way to gain a sense of a ranch's size and terrain than to walk miles of fence, hiking up and down the hills and into the coulees. You imagine the work it must have taken to build these fences, many of them 70 years old or more, and learn about the many different ways there are to erect a gate, brace a corner, and build a water gap.

On that spring day in eastern Montana, the country was as shiny as a newborn colt. Wildflowers bloomed in all directions, and the scoria buttes shimmered

with yellow sweet clover freshened by an early-morning rain.

One volunteer took a break to photograph a pair of nesting curlews—a rare sight in this location. Others saw plovers, wild turkeys, red-tailed hawks, eagles, and antelope, and a few found shed deer antlers. All gained an appreciation for the health and vitality of this piece of eastern Montana.

When crews regrouped at day's end, the pastures had fence lines ready for cows. The volunteers, though tired, had smiles on their faces as they traded tools for water bottles. As he looked down a line of tightly stretched, well-stapled barbed wire, MBA president Jim Gappa said, “It gives me great pleasure helping a Montana family in need of a little assistance, and just letting them know we heard of their situation and we do care. I hope to be involved in another work party next year.”

It was just another day, just another successful demonstration of individuals making a special effort to celebrate landowner/hunter relations by donating time and effort to help a Montana ranch family. 🐾

*To learn how to sponsor a ranch appreciation work day, contact your local FWP office or Alan Charles at (406) 444-3798; acharles@mt.gov.*

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS** Below and right: Hunters and anglers from across the state construct a livestock windbreak as part of a ranch appreciation work day near Colstrip.



**THEIR AIM IS TRUE** Left and below: Members of the Montana Bowhunters Association and regional FWP staff fix fences on the Cecil Brown Ranch. The work was to thank the ranch for providing years of hunting access and maintaining healthy wildlife habitat.

